
Minnesota Alternative Response Evaluation Second Annual Report

Executive Summary

conducted for the
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conducted by the
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Alternative Response Evaluation Second Annual Report

Executive Summary

This is the second annual report of the evaluation being conducted of the Minnesota Alternative Response Project by the Institute of Applied Research. The Alternative Response (AR) Project is a child protection demonstration that provides a differential response to child maltreatment reports. The AR project builds on the work of prior initiatives that have sought to find more effective ways of applying a family-centered and family-friendly approach to resolving issues that bring families to the attention of the child protection system. The project is being generously supported by the McKnight Foundation along with federal, state and county funding.

The Minnesota Alternative Response Project began during the latter half of 2000 and will operate as a demonstration program in 20 counties for a period of four years. Participating counties represent the diversity of the state and include large metro counties, fast-growing suburban counties, counties with mid-sized cities that are regional economic centers, and rural counties in different parts of greater Minnesota.

A three-part evaluation of the project began in February, 2001 and will continue through the end of the demonstration period. It includes impact, process and cost effectiveness studies. This second annual evaluation report provides a summary of process and outcome findings through the end of December, 2002.

Experimental Design, Data Sources and Study Population

Monthly extracts of data in the Social Service Information System (SSIS) are provided to IAR and these data allow the tracking of child protection families in the 20 counties participating in the project. This tracking involves the longitudinal monitoring of outcomes associated with families who receive the alternative response. In addition, in 14 counties, a control group of families was selected as part of an experimentally designed impact study. In impact study counties, families with child maltreatment reports appropriate for the alternative response are randomly (although disproportionately) assigned to experimental or control study groups. Families in the experimental group receive the alternative response, while families in the control group receive the traditional response in place prior to the demonstration.

The last monthly extract of SSIS data received prior to this report included the end of December, 2002. Through that date, a total of 8,318 families with accepted child maltreatment reports in the 20 demonstration counties had been determined to be appropriate for the alternative response. Among these families, 6,158 were in the 14 counties participating in the impact portion of the study and were assigned to either the experimental group (57.4 percent) and received the alternative response or the control

group (36.9 percent) and received the traditional response. Other data sources include feedback from families and child protection case workers. Through the end of 2002, primary caregivers in 909 families have provided feedback—270 through interviews and 639 in completed written questionnaires. Detailed case information has been obtained from county CPS workers on 490 families selected in the study sample. Detailed cost information associated with a sample of cases will be collected beginning in the spring of 2003 as part of the cost-effectiveness study. Regular site visits and staff interviews are being conducted throughout the demonstration period as part of the evaluation.

Process Findings

Screening. The percentage of child maltreatment reports that were screened appropriate for the alternative response rose during the second year of the project. Through the first two years, 36.7 percent of reports were screened for AR. Excluding Hennepin County, the largest county in the state and the one that has been most cautious in its screening, the percent rises to 47.5 percent. There remains considerable variation among counties in the percentage of reports judged appropriate for AR which ranges from a low of 22 percent in Hennepin to 62 percent in Olmsted and Pope counties.

Track Changes. The initial classification of a report as appropriate for the alternative response may be changed to a traditional response at any point while the family is in contact with the child protection system. This is most likely to happen during the assessment phase if safety concerns exceed what was anticipated based on the report or, in some counties, if the family is uncooperative. The frequency of track changes increased during the second year of the project from 3.9 percent at the end of the first year to 8.2 percent through the end of the second year.

Changes in Practice: Interim Findings. A basic question in the evaluation is: Has child protection practice changed as a result of the demonstration? The assumption is that a change in practice is a precondition for changes in outcomes. The AR demonstration seeks to change practice in two ways: 1) approaching families as a unit and in a positive manner consistent with sound family-centered practice, focusing on the problems they may be experiencing and on their needs, and involving them in decision making about what to do, and 2) providing services and assistance that fit the needs and situations of families, linking them to other community resources when possible. Through the first two years of the demonstration, findings indicate that practice is being reshaped in both ways.

A number of specific differences have been found in practice with the introduction of the alternative response that rise to the level of statistical significance.

Compared with families that received the traditional approach, AR families have been more likely to report:

- Greater satisfaction with the way they were treated by child protection workers.
- That they were treated in a friendly manner.
- That they were more involved in decision making.

- That CPS workers tried to understand their situation and needs.
- That they experienced fewer negative feelings following the first visit from a county child protection worker. For example, they were less likely than families who received a traditional assessment to report that they were worried, stressed, confused, afraid or discouraged.
- That they experienced relief and reassurance following the initial visit from workers.
- That workers met with them on subsequent occasions in which their children or whole family were present.
- That workers helped them obtain services.
- That workers themselves provided direct assistance to families.
- That workers connected them to other community resources.

Correspondingly, compared with the traditional approach to child protection, CPS workers that utilize AR have been more likely to report:

- That they had more contact with families.
- That they conducted interim and final assessments.
- That families were cooperative.
- That services and support were provided to the families.
- That the services provided were effective and matched to the needs of families.
- That services were provided across a broader spectrum of service areas.
- That families were linked to a broader set of community resources.
- That extended families were involved in providing support to the families.

Reports from families and workers about the provision of services is supported by data extracted from SSIS. Through the first two years of the demonstration, SSIS data indicates that families who received the alternative response were more than twice as likely to have an ongoing case opened than families who received the traditional response. For most families, having a formal case opened is a precondition for receiving services, particularly funded services.

Impact Findings

The impact analysis was limited to 1,367 experimental and 961 control families whose cases had closed on or before May 31, 2002. This insured that at least six months had elapsed after case closure for each family in the analysis.

Measuring the Risk of New Child Abuse and Neglect. Analysis of the Minnesota Structured Decision Making (SDM) Risk Assessment instrument was conducted for families screened as appropriate for AR. Risk assessments are conducted on initial visits to families. Risk assessment scores should be generally predictive of new reports of child maltreatment—families with higher risk score should be reported more frequently than families with lower risk scores. This was found to be true of the SDM items associated with child neglect. The abuse items on the SDM risk assessment instrument were not predictive of new reports.

Child Safety and Risk. Child safety and risk are different concepts. Safety refers to immediate dangers from which children must be protected. Risk is a measure of the likelihood of future maltreatment based on the characteristics and past behaviors of family members and on the situations of families. To illustrate the difference, over a third of substantiated reports in the control group were low-risk and about four out of ten unsubstantiated cases were moderate to high-risk.

Variation in Risk among Study Counties. The counties in the evaluation varied substantially in their willingness to accept moderate- to high-risk cases for AR. This difference was related to the proportion of total reports each county accepted to AR. The more cases accepted, the more likely a county was accepting moderate- to high-risk cases for AR. Olmsted County, with the longest running AR program, accepted the most moderate- to high-risk families under the AR approach.

Safety Problems Found. Excessive discipline was the most frequent type of child abuse and lack of supervision was the most frequent type of child neglect among AR-appropriate families. In a majority (54 percent) of families in the current sample no child safety problems were identified. No further work would have been done with many of the families in this category under traditional CPS because child maltreatment allegations would not have been substantiated.

Changes in Child Safety. The primary question concerning changes in child safety was whether children in experimental families (who received the AR approach) were less safe than children in control families who received a traditional CPS investigation. While analyses generally showed greater safety improvement among families who received AR, differences were not statistically significant. At this point in the evaluation, children and families receiving AR are as safe as children in families receiving the traditional response.

Service Orientation. The introduction of AR has brought significant shifts in the service orientation of local offices, including a significant increase in services to families, particularly for low-risk families and families in which no child safety problems are found:

Increased Case Management under AR. Case-management workgroups are created when ongoing monitoring and services are thought to be necessary to protect children and to address family and individual needs that have been uncovered. Three times as many case-management workgroups were opened in experimental as in control cases, and nearly all case-management workgroups in control cases were opened only when the investigation had discovered child maltreatment. In addition, experimental and control families on average had virtually identical risk levels; yet, case-management workgroups were opened for the full spectrum of (neglect) risk levels among experimental families while only for the higher-risk families in the control group.

Greater Case Management in Non-Impact Study Counties. Among families that received AR, greater proportions had case management initiated in the six counties not participating in the impact study, because as a whole they tended to be higher risk and include more threats to child safety. Case-management workgroups are opened more frequently on such families.

Preventive Services Emphasized. More services of various types were delivered to experimental families who had received the AR approach. Increased levels of services addressing basic family needs (basic household needs, housing, rent assistance, transportation, training and employment) among a broader range of families. This suggests an increase in preventive services that address both short-term and long-term child protection needs, as well as general child and family welfare.

New Reports of Child Maltreatment. No statistically significant differences were found in the level of new child maltreatment reports (after initial cases had closed) for experimental compared to control families. This mirrored earlier findings in the evaluation. No differences were apparent when taking into account case management openings and risk of neglect levels during the initial case.

New Case-Management Workgroups Resulting From New Reports. Opening new case-management workgroups indicates that a new report on the family was received, and that after meeting with and assessing the family, workers decided that the safety of the child and/or the needs of the family warranted further monitoring and services. The rate of new case openings was significantly lower for low-risk AR cases compared to control cases. For every 100 low-risk cases provided a traditional response, current results indicate that about 21 could be expected to return to the system and have case management cases opened over about three years. On the other hand, about 12 of every 100 low-risk AR cases would be expected to return in the same way. This is consistent with the more intensive service response observed for low-risk families under AR.